

Nevada's history of race relations in the 1950s and 1960s was compared by journalists and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to that of some southern American states, notably Mississippi. Although not as formalized in law Nevada still provided many examples of racism against minorities in housing, employment, and public accommodation. Early beginnings of the civil rights movement in Nevada can be traced at least as far back as 1959 when planning for the February 1960 Winter Olympic Games at Squaw Valley was underway. The U.S. Justice Department was concerned because of the impact racial discrimination in public accommodations might have on international visitors and was anxious that nothing should occur to mar or blot that event. Likewise, the California Attorney General was concerned because Olympic visitors would be visiting and staying in northern Nevada where people of color would be treated with bias.



Figure 1: Governor Grant Sawyer at the 1960 Winter Olympic Games at Squaw Valley, California. Courtesy of Nevada State Archives. NUL-0708.



Figure 2: Picketers in front of the State Capitol protesting discrimination in employment and public accommodation in casinos, 1961. Courtesy of Nevada State Archives. NUL-0456.

Governor Grant Sawyer (1959-1967) used his power and influence to push the cause of civil rights in Nevada - it was the most salient issue of his administration. He

banned discrimination in all phases of state employment and required state contractors to do the same. In the gaming industry he tried moral persuasion, and when that failed, his power over licensing to force equal access to public accommodations. The threat of barring gaming licenses was disarmed when the State Attorney General ruled in March 1960 that the Gaming Control Act of 1959 did not allow the Gaming Commission to attach conditions to State gaming licenses subjecting licensees to disciplinary action for racial discrimination.

The first legislative remedies to prohibiting discrimination in Nevada came during the 1961 Legislative session. The Nevada Commission on Equal Rights of Citizens (NCERC), currently known as the Equal Rights Commission, was created by the Nevada State Legislature in 1961. Senate Bill 246 sponsored by Senators James Slattery, Mahlon Brown, William Dial, Carl Dodge, Martin Duffy, Peter Echeverria, Frank Gallagher,

Floyd Lamb, Wilson McGowan, Warren Monroe, Bruce Parks, William Rand, and Fred Settlemeyer amended Title 19 of the Nevada Revised Statutes; new provisions in sections 2-9 outlined both public policy and a new commission to gather information about discrimination. These later became part of NRS 233. The public policy statement read:

Sec. 2. 1. It is hereby declared to be the public policy of the State of Nevada to protect the welfare, prosperity, health and peace of all the people of the state, and to foster the right of all persons reasonably to seek, obtain and hold employment and housing accommodations, and reasonably to seek and be granted services in places of public accommodation without discrimination, distinction or restriction because of race, religious creed, color, national origin or ancestry.

The statute authorized the establishment of a commission to investigate actual and alleged practices of discrimination and acts of prejudice and report back to the Legislature so that statutory remedies of equal protection and opportunity could be crafted. The commission consisted of five members serving at the pleasure of the governor and consisted of representatives of the religious, racial, and ethnic groups in Nevada. The governor appointed the chairman. The commission was required to meet at least twice a year and was directed to:

- Foster mutual understanding and respect among all racial, religious and ethnic groups
- Aid in securing equal health and welfare services
- Study and investigate problems arising between groups in the state which might result in tensions, discrimination or prejudice

- Investigate any complaints of discrimination, tensions, or prejudice
- Secure the cooperation of various racial, religious, nationality and ethnic groups etc in educational campaigns devoted to the need for eliminating group prejudice
- Cooperate with and seek the cooperation of federal and state agencies in carrying out projects to eliminate intergroup tensions
- Have the power to accept gifts or bequests to carry out the objects and purposes of the chapter.

The first commission members consisted of Bob Bailey, Las Vegas; Lillian Collins, Boulder City; the Reverend Robert J. Sawyer, Reno; Bert Goldwater, Reno; and Arthur Manning, Owyhee. The statute gave the commission the power to receive and investigate complaints and to initiate its own investigations of tensions, practices of discrimination and acts of prejudice against any person or group because of race, color, creed, national origin or ancestry and to conduct private or public hearings. The commission had the power to subpoena witnesses and request evidence in their investigations.

The first meeting of the commission took place at the Clark County Courthouse, July 15, 1961. Chairman Bert Goldwater opened by noting the commission did not make charges, enforce, or reprimand but was only a fact-finding body. Their purpose was to make a broad study of the problem of discrimination in Nevada and make recommendations for legislation. (Attorney General file, AGO-0080, #9.)

The commission first held hearings in Reno on November 12-13, 1962. Attending were top officials from all state and local government agencies and private businesses. Subsequent meetings were held in Hawthorne on November 26th and in Las Vegas on December 17-18, 1962; and January 4, 1963. Discussions on compliance to the public policy related to discrimination were held at all the meetings and participants spoke of why there were so few minorities employed in various fields. Public officials claimed they followed state policy to the letter and the lack of minorities was due to a lack of applicants. However, the owner of the El Capitan Casino in Hawthorne, Mr. Smith, claimed he "must continue to discriminate or loose customers." 95% of the gaming representatives had to be subpoenaed to attend the Las Vegas meetings in order to obtain their testimony.

NCERC, with the governor's efforts and subsequent legislation became the conduit for change regarding racial discrimination by reporting on employment practices of employers; conducting compliance reviews of state agencies, hotels and casinos, school districts, retail businesses, and federal government installations; and holding private and public hearings that mandated compliance. The commission also conducted extensive educational campaigns fostering the eradication of prejudice. Over the next decade the commission refined a policy of reconciliation as their main tool in resolving complaints of bias in employment and public accommodations. A major accomplishment during this period was a landmark decision in which the U.S. Justice Department initiated a consent decree involving the Nevada Resort Association, every major strip hotel property in Las Vegas, and four trade unions with which the Association had exclusive referral agreements. This decree came as a result of a complaint filed with NCERC in March 1968 by the local branch of the NAACP. The resulting consent order of November 1969 required hotels to hire and unions to refer blacks to position from which they were previously excluded.



Figure 3: Members of the black community in the State Capitol hallway on their way to meet with Governor Grant Sawyer, 1965. Courtesy of Nevada State Archives. NUL-0442.

The State Legislature of 1971 enacted NRS Chapter 118, the Nevada Fair Housing Law and designated NCERC to implement and enforce its provisions which for the first time included discrimination based on sex. The 1973 and 1975 sessions of the Legislature added additional classes of persons to be protected from discrimination based on age and disability, both physical and visual. Although Commission membership stayed at five in number the Commission's staff grew to include an Executive Secretary, secretaries, and investigators, with offices in both Las Vegas and Reno.

Charges of discrimination in employment are still the largest single cause of complaints filed with the Commission. The Commission has the authority to investigate individual complaints but also employment practices of an entire system such as a business, union or employment program. The Commission is now part of the Nevada Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation.

Records of the Equal Rights Commission 1958-1997; bulk 1970-1972 2.5 cu. ft.

The records of the Equal Rights Commission in the Nevada State Archives consist of three series: Affirmative Action Records, Compliance Reports, and Administrative Records. NRS 233.190 establishes the confidentiality of records of the Commission's investigations of alleged unlawful discriminatory practice in housing, employment, and public accommodations and specifies conditions under which those case file records are no longer confidential. Those records are scheduled for destruction by the Commission three years from the close of the case. None of those records have been received by the State Archives. Of the records in the State Archives, all are open for research. An in-house database provides folder level access.

Affirmative Action Records 1958; 1963-1979; bulk 1970-1972 1 cu. ft. ERC-0001

This series contains surveys of and correspondence to and from various types of institutions describing their affirmative action programs. The file contents vary but may include EEO statements, statistics on workforce composition, sample job application forms, rules and regulations of the Civil Service Commission, and newspaper clippings. The records are arranged by type of organization such as banks, cities, businesses, hotels and casinos, construction and unions, and public utilities (including television and radio stations).

Compliance Reports 1965-1984; bulk 1970-1972 1.25 cu. ft. ERC-0002 to ERC-0003

This series consists of surveys sent to the categories of organizations listed above in the Affirmative Action series description, requesting information about the number of employees; employment policies related to race, color, religion, and national origin; types of interviews and pre-employment tests used; statistics categorizing employees by sex and minority groups; sample job application forms; and newspaper clippings. Also included in ERC-0001 are copies of U.S. Presidential Executive Orders #11246 and #11375 for 1965 and 1967 regarding equal employment opportunity and nondiscrimination in government employment.

Administrative Records 1967; 1977-1988; 1995-1997 .25 cu. ft. ERC-0003

This series includes minutes of commission meetings, reports of the commissioner to the governor and Legislature for 1965 and 1977, biennial budget materials and statistics, detailed responses to requests for information from the Legislative Counsel Bureau regarding Commission operations in 1996, and a policy statement regarding attorney contact with clients (1997).

The minutes for the Commission are incomplete but include the following:

- December 8, 1977
- March 8 and December 6, 1979
- June 19 and December 29, 1980
- February 6 and October 7, 1981
- March 3 and June 30, 1982
- May 11, 1983
- August 21, 1986
- January 21, 1988
- August 3, 1995
- January 17, 1996

Minutes for the Commission meetings of July 15, 1961 and December 12, 1963 are part of the Nevada Attorney General correspondence files and are located in box AGO-0080, folder 9. Folders 8 and 10 also contain correspondence related to the early days of the Commission and to the months in late 1959 and early 1960 preceding the Winter Olympic Games at Squaw Valley.